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XII. THE SECOND WORLD WAR, 1939-1943

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THE outbreak of war brought immediate changes in every sphere of life, in Syria and Lebanon as in the other countries involved. For months past reinforcements had been arriving for the French army of occupation. At the beginning of the war the important part for which the forces in the Mandated Territories were cast was shown by the appointment of General Weygand as Commander-in-Chief of the French Forces in the Levant. Other measures were taken to place the Territories in a state of defence. The urgency of the situation was somewhat eased, however, by the decision of the Italian Government to remain neutral.

Various political measures were also taken to ensure the safety of the country. In Lebanon the High Commissioner dissolved the Chamber, dismissed the Ministry, suspended the Constitution and confided the administration to a Secretary of State directly responsible to the President of the Republic. In Syria, a number of political organizations believed to be favourable to the enemies of France were dissolved, and some of their leading members were arrested. During the next few months many of them were sentenced by military tribunals to terms of imprisonment, in some cases exceedingly long, on charges of subversive action and conspiracy. Those affected were mainly members of uncompromising nationalist organizations or of the Communist Party; no leader either of the National Bloc or of the Shahbandarist group was touched. Most leading personalities indeed gave formal expression to their attachment to France and to democracy, and their unwillingness to do anything which might hinder the victory of the Allied arms.

In spite of formal statements by political leaders, the general attitude of the population towards the war seems to have been one not of enthusiasm but of mingled fear and apathy. There was fear of a repetition of the terrible experiences of the war of 1914-1918: famine, disease and the reign of terror. Except among the Francophil elements, people tended to think that, although the belligerents might invoke the noblest of principles to justify their taking up arms, in reality all were equally moved by self-interest, and that from the point of view of the exploited nations of the East there was nothing to choose

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between the oppression exercised in the name of democracy and that exercised in the name of Fascism. This tendency was encouraged by the efforts of the competing propaganda services, each of which purported to unmask the true face of the other party. Moreover, painful memories remained of the conduct of the Allies during the last war. The Arabs had trusted to Allied promises then and had been, as they saw it, cheated. They were therefore sceptical, and afraid to give their full trust to either side. Still more bitter were the memories of the years immediately preceding the outbreak of war: the cession of Alexandretta, the failure to ratify the Syrian and Lebanese Treaties, and above all the Arab revolt in Palestine, which had aroused intense feeling throughout Arab Asia, and had done more than anything else to alienate the Arabs from the Allied Powers.

These and other currents of political feeling existed beneath the surface, but there was little overt political activity during the first nine months of the war. The High Commissioner and the Syrian and Lebanese authorities confined themselves mainly to measures of administrative reform and economic and financial control; the safeguarding of the food supply against the activities of hoarders and profiteers was their constant preoccupation. In external affairs one source of anxiety was removed by the conclusion in November, 1939, of the Anglo-Franco-Turkish Pact, and in March, 1940, of a Turco-Syrian Agreement of Friendship and Good Neighbourliness. But a new anxiety grew up, with the German offensive on the Western front in May, 1940, and the entry of Italy into the war in June; it reflected itself in the additional measures of precaution taken in the Mandated Territories.

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After the capitulation of France there was some doubt about the attitude which the French authorities in the Levant would adopt. It was resolved by the order of the day issued on June 27th by General Mittelhauser, who had succeeded Weygand after the latter had been recalled to take command of the Allied Forces in France. 'According to the terms of the French armistice', he announced, 'there will be no change in the status of the Mandated Territories. Consequently, the cessation of hostilities has been ordered. The French flag

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000 Lebanon the Government of Sami as-Sulh succeeded that of
645 Ahmad ad-Da'uq. In Syria, Hasan al-Hakim resigned in April, 1942, and was succeeded by Husni al-Barazi, who himself gave way in January, 1943, to Jamil al-Ulshi. These changes had only a very limited significance.

648 This failure to restore the constitutional Government
186 increased the discontent which had already been caused in both Syria and Lebanon by the way in which their independence had been proclaimed. The administrative methods of the Free French officials were also much criticized; more particularly, a general contempt was felt for the many officials who had served Vichy and had only gone over to Free France after the occupation of the country in 1941. Thus the belief grew up that Syria and Lebanon had gained nothing by their change of masters. It was a belief held not only by the political classes but by ordinary citizens who resented the inefficiency of the French administration; not only by Arab nationalists but even by many of the Lebanese Christians, who could not feel towards the Free French the admiration, gratitude and trust which they had had for France as a great Power. In the circumstances it was natural that Great Britain should be largely blamed for the actions of her ally.

645 One consequence of the discontent was a revival in the
665 power of the National Bloc. The dissensions between its leaders were patched up, and the Bloc united in its demand for the restoration of the Chamber of 1936-1939 or else the holding of fresh elections. Its spokesman was Shukri al-Quwatli, whose reputation had grown steadily throughout the years. In October, 1941, shortly after the Allied occupation, he absented himself from Syria on a visit to Arabia and Iraq; but after his return to Damascus in September, 1942, he became once more the dominant figure of the political scene. Side by side with the revival of the Bloc there went a growth in the size and influence of the Socialist and Communist movements; this was due not so much to the spread of Marxist doctrines as to the universal discontent with the existing order and the eagerness to snatch at any hope of change.

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722 In Syria and Lebanon alike, the attention of the greater part of the population was concentrated upon the economic problems of the war. Two of them were peculiarly important.

First, there was the problem of guaranteeing the supply of wheat, guarding against both the fear and the reality of shortage and putting an end to the hoarding of grain which had been going on since the beginning of the war. Shortly after the Allied occupation, a large quantity of wheat was brought into the country by the Allied authorities and sold to the wholesale merchants, for the purpose of making hoarders disgorge their stocks. Since many of the merchants either hoarded the wheat or else sold it to Turkey, this measure did not have the effect which had been hoped. For the harvest of 1942, a different plan was adopted. A Commission was appointed, with English, French, Syrian and Lebanese members, and under the ultimate control of the British and French authorities. Its task was to buy the whole wheat-crop, over and above the needs of the cultivator; it was then to be distributed directly to the population at fixed prices and in limited amounts. This scheme also did not work well at first. The population was unused to such interference by the Government in economic processes and suspicious of its motives; the various authorities concerned did not always agree; there was much hoarding, and not a little corruption. But gradually things improved. In spite of numerous temporary and local difficulties, the situation of the wheat supply is not unsatisfactory.

The other problem was that of the inflationary tendencies which appeared as a consequence of the shortage of supplies, the practice of hoarding, the excessive issue of paper-money, and the general lack of confidence in the future of France and even more of the Free French.

Measures have been taken to keep this tendency within limits; for example, in May, 1943, the restrictions upon the purchase of sterling were removed. But the danger is bound to remain so long as the war lasts. Perhaps the most important of the steps taken to improve the economic situation is the attempt which has been made through the Anglo-American Middle East Supply Centre in Cairo to increase the local production of goods which the Middle Eastern countries need, and to improve their distribution. Established to deal with the situation caused by the shortage of shipping, the Centre has tended more and more to become a planning organization for the economic life of the area which it serves.

Unemployment, too, might have been a danger, had it not

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722 been for the large programme of public works undertaken by the Ninth Army; they include the construction of a railway line between Haifa and Tripoli, the building of roads and the execution of schemes of irrigation.

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648 After long hesitation, the Free French at last decided to
642 restore constitutional government. This step was made easier in Syria by the death of Shaikh Taj in January, 1943. A few days later M. Helleu, who was deputizing for General Catroux, absent in North Africa, announced that the General would authorize the re-establishment of the Constitution on his return to the Levant. In March, 1943, provisional Governments were established in both Syria and Lebanon in order to make the necessary arrangements for the elections; that in Syria was headed by Ata al-Ayyubi, that in Lebanon by Dr. Ayyub Tabit.

666 In Syria the arrangements were soon completed. It was
646 decided that the Chamber should consist of 124 deputies,
665 including a number of representatives of the minorities; and that the elections for it should be held in two stages. The primary elections were held on July 10th-11th, the secondary on July 26th. They resulted in an overwhelming majority for the National Bloc. The victory of the Bloc was more complete in Damascus than in Aleppo, where there was a split in the nationalist ranks.

643 On August 17th, 1943, the new Chamber met and elected
645 Shukri al-Quwatli President of the Republic and Faris al-Khuri President of the Chamber. A few days later a new Ministry took office, drawn almost wholly from the Bloc. It was constituted as follows:

Prime Minister	.. ..	Saadullah al-Jabiri.
Minister for Foreign Affairs		Jamil Mardam Bey.
Minister of the Interior	..	Lutfi al-Haffar.
Minister of Finance	..	Khalid al-Azm.
Minister of Defence and Public Instruction	..	Nasuhi al-Bukhari.
Minister of Public Works and Supplies	.. ..	Mazhar Raslan.
Minister of Justice	..	Abdur-Rahman al-Kayyali.
Minister of Agriculture and Commerce	..	Tawfiq Shamiyyah.